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CHILD WELFARE IN *Newsletter* PROGRESS

Mediation and conciliation stressed

Now that maintenance enforcement has been taken over by the Attorney General's department Social Services can concentrate more on mediation and conciliation.

The Maintenance Enforcement Act was proclaimed on February 1, 1986 making the Attorney General's department responsible for all collection and enforcement. Registration of all Social Services maintenance orders and agreements should be completed by March 31, 1987.

Family and Children's Services will still be responsible for obtaining maintenance orders and agreements for social assistance clients, assisting the private sector in obtaining custody, access and maintenance orders, and for provision of mediation and conciliation activities in the province.

Program Planner Bob Lane welcomes the change. "Winding down the enforcement allows us to refocus our objectives on the more human side of mediation and conciliation," he says.

Two pilot projects have been established with this goal in mind. The Edmonton Custody Mediation Project -- a joint Social Service and Attorney General's project -- began operation in January of 1985. Couples that can't agree on custody or access are referred to the project by the courts. Mediators try to resolve the dispute and bring the couple to mutual agreement. If mediation fails, the courts order an assessment or home study -- the cost of which is borne by the couple, but may be subsidized by the Attorney General's department if necessary.

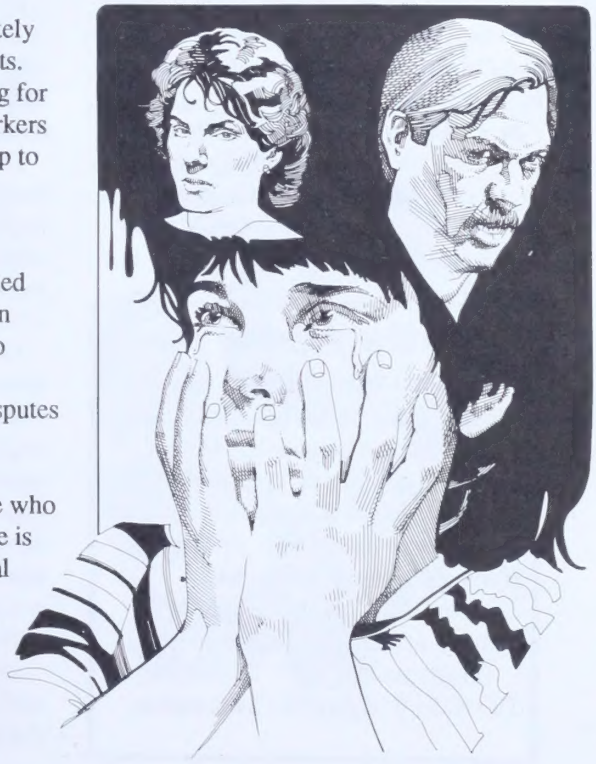
"Our mediators are successful in obtaining agreements in approximately 76 percent of the cases," Lane reports. This represents a considerable saving for social workers, judges and court workers as an assessment alone could take up to 40 hours of a social worker's time.

An Income Security - Family Mediation Pilot Project started the beginning of October, 1986 at the Red Deer District Office and the Radisson office in Calgary. The purpose is to obtain maintenance agreements or resolutions of custody and access disputes which have a likelihood of being honoured.

All applicants for social allowance who are separated or divorced, where there is the possibility of mediating financial maintenance or any problems of custody or access, will be referred to the projects.

"There is a projected cost saving by facilitating the reconciliation of a family or by reducing the amount of social allowance necessary if a voluntary maintenance agreement is obtained," Lane points out.

Last year over $7 million was collected through maintenance orders and agreements which was applied to offset the cost of social allowance.



Native Children's Guardians appointed

Two Native Children's Guardians have been appointed and two more are being recruited to fulfill a commitment made to the Native Bands and Councils in negotiations with the department regarding their taking on child welfare responsibilities.

An agreement has been signed with the Blackfoot Band Council in Gleichen for that band to assume some child welfare responsibilities for children from that Band and the department is negotiating similar agreements with the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Indian Council and the Yellowhead Tribal Council.

"In order to better ensure sensitivity to the needs and values of native communities and their children, the minister has agreed to the appointment of native children's guardians," explains the provincial Children's Guardian, Herb Sohn.

At this point, each Native Children's Guardian is to assume responsibilities for children in two regions. The Native Children's Guardian will work closely with the Regional Children's Guardians working in the same regions.

Anne Manyfingers has been appointed to the Northeast and Edmonton Regions and will be located in Edmonton. Randy McHugh has been appointed to the South and Calgary Regions and will be located in Calgary.

Manyfingers was most recently a staff trainer for Native Counselling Services of Alberta, having served that agency in other capacities, including family court supervisor and family court worker. In 1984, she was appointed to the Native Child Welfare Working Committee. Manyfingers obtained her post-secondary education at the University of Calgary, where she majored in education. She also holds a certificate as a teacher's aide.

McHugh is a social worker by training, having earned both the Bachelor of Social Welfare and the Master of Social Welfare degrees at the University of Calgary. His undergraduate degree was obtained at Wilfrid Laurier Univeristy where he majored in psychology. McHugh has been employed since 1981 with the Alberta Department of Social Services in the Calgary Region. Prior social service experience includes work in Ontario as a juvenile probation officer, a houseparent for emotionally disturbed adolescents as well as an administrative assistant and researcher for a Native organization.

A number of applications have been received for the Northwest and Central Regions' Native Children's Guardian position and a fourth position at the Headquarters office.

Manuals Available

The Child Welfare Handbook and Program Manual are now in stock.

Copies can be obtained from Publication Services, Queens Printer Building, 11510 Kingsway Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5G 2Y5 or Room 601, the J. J. Bowlen Building, 620 7th. Avenue S. W. Calgary at a cost of $7.00 each.

Telephone 427-4387 (Edmonton) or 297-6251 (Calgary) for information.

Decisions hard to make

Decisions on what is in a child's best interest are difficult to make. Situations are rarely black and white. Each child is different and each set of circumstances is different.

"Social workers make decisions based primarily on policy," the director of the Appeal and Advisory Secretariat points out. "Denying a request doesn't mean the social worker is insensitive to the circumstances, but the worker is obliged to follow policy."

Micky Casavant believes the Child Welfare Appeal Panel plays an important role because it can overrule policy, although it can never step beyond the bounds of legislation.

The seven-member panel was established under the Child Welfare Act to provide an impartial sounding-board when people affected by certain decisions made by Social Services staff, disagree with those decisions.

The types of appeals received range from a request to move a native child from a white home to a reserve to a request for the department to enter into an agreement for special services. In the later case, a refusal to provide extra funding for one-to-one supervison and teaching of a child in an institution was reversed.

There have been several cases where foster parents applied to adopt the children in their care and were refused, Casavant says. In one case the Appeal Panel reversed the decision of the department to refuse an application for adoption. The Panel felt that although the parents' advanced age was a consideration, it was compensated for by the love, concern and experience within the home. In another case, it upheld the decision as the prospective adoptive parents used corporal punishment as a primary method of discipline and had inadequate financial managment skills to support a child. In another adoption case the panel upheld the decision of a director to refuse an adoption application due to the fact the family already had several adopted children as well as foster children in the home.

Children in care also have a right to appeal and several have appealed moves from one foster home to another. A 14-year-old girl's appeal of a decision moving her to another institution was reversed.

The panel upheld a refusal to disclose information being of the opinion that the best interests of the child and her mother did not require complete access to the entire departmental files.

It takes the Appeal Panel one or two days for a hearing and sometimes another day to discuss the situation among themselves and reach a decision.

"They are tough decisions to make because they effect the lives and futures of the children, the foster or adoptive homes," Casavant notes.

HCS reviewed as attitudes change

Parents of children with severe handicaps or illnesses are faced with extraordinary caretaking responsibilities. In the past, professionals were likely to recommend that parents institutionalize children who had such intensive needs. Now the professional attitude has changed and parents are much less often encouraged to institutionalize their child.

"The bias is that the best place for handicapped children is in their own home and the next best place is in some home, but we try to keep them out of institutions," program planner Val Kinjerski says.

Various options have been developed both to provide parents with support in caring for their child at home and to provide a home-like atmosphere for those children who are placed outside of their parents' homes. In many cases, home and community care has proven to be less expensive than institutional care.

In Alberta, Handicapped Children's Services was introduced in 1974 as part of the government's commitment to improve benefits and services for the handicapped. HCS was designed as a universal preventive program to avoid institutionalization by assisting parents to care for their handicapped child at home. The program provides financial assistance with special needs costs and some client support services.

A project team was recently established to review the existing HCS program and redesign it to ensure it meets with the philosophy, values and current strategic directions of Alberta Social Services.

"We are presently doing a needs analysis with staff, sorting out the problems and needs of families with handicapped children and surveying other jurisdictions to see how they are providing support services to families where children are handicapped," says project manager Kinjerski.

An extensive literature and program review is underway and a current value base for HCS is being developed. The project team will be redrafting the policy manual and developing new benefit schedules to reflect the HCS philosophy.

"We want to collaborate with other social service programs both within and outside of the department to fill gaps and avoid duplications in services," Kinjerski says.

The project team will also be designing and implementing a pilot to test innovative ways of delivering services to families.

Standards developed to ensure quality care

Standards that specify the essential requirements for agency operation and client care are being developed by Alberta Social Services to reflect the department's commitment to achieving and maintaining quality services.

A document proposing standards for community and residential child welfare services along with other areas of social service will be forwarded to the minister this fall and widely circulated for public input.

"There will be ample opportunity for both information and response from government and private members of the social services community," promises Don Storch, manager of the Standards Implementation Project.

Meetings to allow service providers, parents, guardians, clients, community members, departmental staff and others who will be affected by the proposed standards to express their views will be held around the province. Written responses will also be welcomed, according to Storch.

Questions to be provoked in the consultation will include the manner in which the standards would be implemented and how compliance with standards will be monitored by agencies and audited by the department.

"Many of the department's clients may be vulnerable as a result of physical or mental handicaps, social or economic disadvantage," Storch explains. "Generic standards will help to provide protection for those who need it most."

Clear service expectations will ensure provision of the best possible care for clients and will protect the service providers, he says.

The proposed guidelines include the areas of organization, administration, finance, personnel, services/programs, clients/population served, relationship to community, evaluation and physical plant and equipment.

For further information,
call 427-2619 or contact the
Standards Implementation Project,
11th. floor,
Seventh Street Plaza,
10030 - 107 Street,
Edmonton.

Jack Flaherty and Sy Bekoff were loaned to the AFPA.

Rethinking foster care

Improving support services to foster parents and developing a better understanding in the community of what foster care is all about are just two of the challenges facing the Alberta Foster Parent Association.

Two Alberta Social Services employees have been loaned to the AFPA to assist the association in achieving its goals.

Jack Flaherty, who was formerly the senior director of the residential replacement plan, has become the new executive director and Sy Bekoff, who was the provincial program planner for foster care, is the assistant director. The AFPA has opened a new provincial headquarters at #1250, 10055 - 106th. Street, in Edmonton.

"There was a need for the Alberta Foster Parent Association to have administrative staff to handle the business of the association," AFPA president Dennis Turner says. "Our volunteers have been bogged down trying to cope with all the tasks."

The organization has over 40 local associations in the six regions with 1500 members and hopes to encourage more foster parents to join. The AFPA newsletter and educational programs are provided to all foster parents, regardless of whether they are members.

Linking the provincial organization to the local associations and working with the board members to achieve the goals of the organization will be Flaherty's major responsibilities. He will also be assisting the board in developing policy and procedures, controlling finances and providing liaison to the community.

"We have to try and get a better public understanding of what foster care is all about and develop a better image in the community," he says.

Bekoff will be spending his time and energy in the area of programs.

"One of the goals is to intensify services," he comments. "We plan to seek new and additional ways of being supportive to foster parents."

Turner would like to expand the role of the AFPA and see it become more involved in training. "We need staff and a support system in order to do that," he says.

The Child Welfare Act places a whole new emphasis on foster care and the importance of developing a partnership between the Social Services department and foster parents.

"In the past, the staff sometimes didn't recognize the skills and input of the foster parents or use them as a resource in decision making," Turner points out.

He also sees foster parents playing a larger role as prevention workers helping families stay together and working with families at risk. He gives examples of foster families taking the parent and child into their home or providing support in the home of the natural family.

"Foster families can be a great help in making the Act come to life," the AFPA president says.

"Foster care is a substitute family situation with the intent of returning the child to his or her natural family as soon as possible if at all possible," Bekoff explains. "If the child cannot return to the family, then permanency planning should be our goal utilizing such options as adoption, guardianship or long-term care."

There are many other challenges facing foster care. Over a third of foster children are native in non-native homes. There is a lack of permanency planning -- children are moved from home to home. Foster parents have to be trained to deal with things like abuse or family breakdown. It is difficult to recruit foster parents and retain them.

The AFPA would like to become more involved in the area of recruitment. "Ideally, if enough foster homes were recruited, we could match up a child and the child's needs with the specific foster home," Bekoff says. Better matches between children and foster parents would decrease movement of the child from one home to another.

A problem is that people who apply to become foster parents want a child in their home immediately and become dissatisfied or lose interest if they have to wait for a good match. "We have to find ways to encourage them to stay involved," Turner comments.

Throughout North America there is a pronounced effort to rethink foster care. "We're at the edge of something new and changing and exciting," Bekoff believes.

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